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SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

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Says Professor Thomas R. Lounsbury in his article in *Harper's Magazine* on "Compulsory Composition in Colleges," "On no one subject of education has so great an amount of effort been put forth as on the teaching of English composition with so little satisfactory to show for it." Until a few years ago, he says, very little attention was given to English. Then began an era of theme writing and criticism. "While there are many men who write excellently, there is no increase in the proportional number of this body"—in other words, all our tremendous effort in trying to teach English has been a dismal failure.

A common way of teaching composition is by the use of a textbook on rhetoric. Says Professor Lounsbury:

Another allied illusion is that an effective agency to bring about such a result is the study of rhetoric. . . . As grammar is nothing but the generalization of the facts of utterance, so rhetoric is nothing but the generalization of the facts of style. In both cases the facts must be known before the generalization can be appreciated or even understood. The child does not learn his language from his grammar. After he has learned it in other ways, grammar steps in and furnishes him a scientific analysis of what he has been doing. So rhetoric gives the student the names of the different styles, . . . but the perfect style it does not and cannot impart.

But at any rate constant practice in theme writing will give the results, we are told. To this Professor Lounsbury replies:

At the outset practice is so far from being of highest importance that as compared with other agencies it is of but little. Clearness or effectiveness or felicity of expression can never be created by it, nor can they be developed by it satisfactorily unless the proper foundation has previously been laid. [Correcting these themes is a practical failure for unavoidable reasons.] The task of reading and correcting themes is one of deadly dullness. Men who are really fitted to perform the work are exceedingly rare; and when found, they will not

persist in carrying on this most distasteful of occupations, unless compelled by necessity. As a consequence the business of correcting and criticizing themes tends steadily to fall into the hands of those who are incompetent to do anything much better, and therefore incompetent to do this well.

But that is not all. We are actually teaching errors. Says Professor Lounsbury:

It is fairly certain, indeed, that under our present system no small share of the instruction given in composition conveys as much error as truth. . . . Idioms and constructions employed unhesitatingly by every great master of our speech are as unhesitatingly condemned. Have we not been told again and again that *none* must never be used as the subject of a plural verb; that *whose* must never be used as a relative to an antecedent without life; . . . that the dreadful neologism of *would better* with the infinitive should be substituted for *had better*.

In other words, we are making a tremendous effort to teach the names of rhetorical tools before the student has seen or understood the thing itself—furnishing handles without the instrument to which to attach them. We are making a tremendous ado about practice in expressing without any ideas to express or any models to inspire the best modes of expression. Finally, with a false hypercriticism, we are actually teaching innumerable errors—we are condemning as improprieties the fundamental idioms of the language.

What should we do? Let Professor Lounsbury answer.

Fulness of knowledge and clearness of thinking are the first two requisites which should be possessed by him who sets out to compose a work which has any reason for its existence. [In other words, we should teach life and how to think about it as two-thirds of the elements of success in effective expression. But there are two other qualities which go to constitute the ideal style.] The first is the ability to write with effectiveness, to put forth one's ideas so as not merely to enlighten men, but to impress them, to influence their beliefs and acts. [This is very largely a matter of knowing the persons for whom we are to write so that we can go straight to the points in which they are chiefly interested, and touch the springs to which they will respond. The way to accomplish this is to teach the observation of human nature.] "Higher" even than that, though not infrequently not even conjoined with it [I disagree with Professor Lounsbury as to this being a "higher" quality] is that of exquisiteness of diction, that indescribable charm of expression which we feel in the productions of great authors, but find it difficult if not impossible to analyze.

How shall we learn this art of writing?

The art of writing, like that of painting and sculpture, is an imitative art. Accordingly the culture and perception of beauty necessary to produce success

in it are best and soonest acquired, not by the study of grammatical and rhetorical textbooks, but by the imitation, conscious or unconscious, of some one or some number of those whom the race regards as its great literary representatives. . . . To become thoroughly conversant with the works of a great writer, to be influenced by his method of giving utterance to his ideas, to feel profoundly the power and beauty of his style, is worth more for the development of expression than the mastery of all the rhetorical rules that were ever invented.

The intuition and not the reason is to be educated.

Constant familiarity with the language of authors of the first rank imparts in time that almost intuitive sense of what is right or wrong in usage which distinguishes the cultivated man of letters from the sciolist who bases his judgment upon what he has found in grammars and manuals.

Along with this we must teach pupils how to think.

It has to be repeated again and again that clear thinking precedes clear writing and does not follow it. . . . It is enough to say that any system of instruction ever devised which succeeds in imparting to all those pursuing it clearness of ideas, will have solved the educational problem of the ages and have begun the intellectual regeneration of the race.

Professor Lounsbury's article has been quoted at length because it expresses unusually well the principles in dealing with English composition which the present writer has been struggling toward ever since he graduated from Amherst College in 1889. He was prize man in mathematics and seemed to have a career as engineer cut out for him; but though with small faith in his ability as a writer, he decided to devote his life to applying the modern scientific method to the study and teaching of the English language and literature, simply because no one else seemed in the very least degree likely to do this. From time immemorial, language has been taught as a matter of tradition and authority, and the masters of language have hated mathematics and considered scientific study positively hostile in its barrenness to anything like literary expression.

The modern scientific method is to formulate an hypothesis and then test it for results. Had this method been used by our teachers of composition for the past twenty years, we should not be spending an infinite amount of energy teaching a subject without

getting proper results. When the results did not materialize we should have stopped and investigated to see what was the matter.

The imitation of masterpieces after the method of Franklin and Stevenson has been a popular by-word among writers of modern-language books: but while the authors have said they were following this method, they have in reality stuck very closely to the old-fashioned rhetorics for nine-tenths of their exercises; or else they have gone to the other extreme and provided such a miscellaneous hodge-podge of literary exercises that they have induced a mental indigestion that has dissipated the intuitive mental powers of the student to an alarming degree. The desire of publishers to have everything in a book has taken away all steadiness of purpose, all straightforward, persistent literary practice, and substituted a butterfly flitting from one literary flower to another. The subjects for composition work are either oppressively commonplace and uninteresting, or too difficult and involved.

A RATIONAL COURSE OF STUDY IN COMPOSITION

The conventional division of all literary composition into "Exposition, Narration, Description, and Argumentation" has always seemed to the present writer so artificial as to be useless. The distinction does not help the mind of the student in his practical writing; and as a matter of fact nearly all composition is a judicious union of the four, and students waste time in trying to discriminate when discrimination does not help them. Classifications more natural and well understood, such as the humorous style, the oratorical style, the critical style, the style of fiction, etc., would appeal more strongly to the mind of the student.

As a matter of fact, the easiest form of exposition is found in letter writing. Letter writing also gives the greatly needed practice on conversational English. If the teacher has in the hands of the pupils a thoroughly well-written series of modern business letters such as can now be obtained, and requires steady composition work in imitating and paralleling these good models on easy business subject-matter carefully worked up, an excellent course is provided for the first year in the high school. It is easy enough for all beginners, it gives preliminary written training on conversational

English which so much needs to be taught, and affords the basis for systematic study of grammar, punctuation, and spelling, which should be carried along parallel with the composition work.

The second year is as early as most high-school pupils are capable of taking up the rewriting of selections from the standard authors, even the simplest of those that are at the same time rhetorically typical. The following selections are recommended: Franklin's own description of how he learned to write, Ruskin's "The King of the Golden River" (largely for preliminary work on oral story-telling), Addison's "Advice in Love," some of Stevenson's letters to his mother or his friend Sidney Colvin, Charles Lamb's letter to Bernard Barton describing a cold, Poe's ridicule of "William Ellery Channing," Macaulay's description of "The Puritans," De Quincey's "Dream-Fugue," Thackeray's "Before the Curtain" and description of the Battle of Waterloo in *Vanity Fair*, the opening paragraphs of Matthew Arnold's "Sweetness and Light," compared with the opening paragraphs of Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" in *Sesame and Lilies*, Dickens's story of "Polly" in "Barbox Bros. & Co.," a section of *Mugby Junction* (called by W. E. Henley the best short story Dickens ever wrote, and peculiarly fresh because nearly unknown), a few paragraphs from Crane's "Red Badge of Courage" (as an example of the modern epigrammatic style), a paragraph or two from Ecclesiastes as an example of lofty simplicity, compared with Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* and Lincoln's "Gettysburg Speech."

The third year the composition work might consist in rewriting short stories—condensing Aladdin, for example, from 15,000 words to 1,500 words by a process of judicious selection, changing one of Maupassant's stories from a Paris setting to an American setting and characters, etc.

No better modern practical application of argumentation can be found than in the study of salesmanship and advertisement writing. America is a business nation. Our education is urged largely as a good preparation for success in doing business. Even girls need this training on how to do business—how to find out actual, exact facts such as alone have a standing in business, handling customers with tact, courtesy, and winsome freedom of

conversation, and convincing prospective buyers by the most perfectly developed practical forms of argumentation. It would be difficult to choose better work for the last year in the high school than practical sales letter writing, oral salesmanship talks, and the writing of careful advertisements, based on the study of some actual and universally accessible business, such as that of selling groceries at retail. Incidentally, every person needs to know how to buy food to advantage so as to stop our enormous food waste and reduce our excessive cost of living along the lines employed by the thrifty French.

CORRECTING PAPERS SO AS TO GET RESULTS

In many schools it is certain that positive results from the teaching of English composition are not obtained. It has been proved again and again, however, that they can easily be obtained, and no teacher should be satisfied without them.

Failure comes largely, we believe, from lack of a positive system of the right kind. Teachers are attempting to do the impossible. The report on "English Composition Teaching" of the Modern Language Association, summarizing the opinions and practice of over one thousand teachers, indicates that all consider theme writing essential. High-school pupils average 380 words a week, the number of pupils to a teacher averages 128.6, the themes can be read at an average rate of 1,950 words an hour, and 25 hours each week for the private reading and correcting of themes are required. Of course this is a physical impossibility for English composition teachers who have as many, or nearly as many, hours of classwork as other teachers and receive no higher pay. Some teachers handle as many as 250 pupils at one time.

The only partially successful attempt to do this physically exhausting and nerve-wracking feat results in giving attention to little besides spelling, punctuation, and sentence form, according to the report of the committee. The quality of the work is necessarily so low that results are anything but satisfactory to a majority of these teachers.

That the prodigious effort which is actually breaking down the health of hundreds of teachers of English composition and driving

the best ones out of the field is largely wasted effort is apparent to the outsider, and indeed to many of the teachers, who nevertheless do not see a better way, and base their hope on an increase in the number of assistants. On the present system one teacher can comfortably handle classes of about 12 each, though the committee report indicates they think they can handle about 20 in a class, with a total of 60 to 80. The chances of their getting reduced classes so long as English is required of all pupils, and is assigned a larger number of hours in the course than any other subject, is exceedingly small, we fear.

With such hasty work, is it any wonder that pupils glance over their papers and say, "Did I make all those mistakes?" and then crumple them and throw them into the wastebasket, or lay them away never to be examined again? If they are required to be rewritten, how mechanically is this work done when the mind of the pupil has not been led to clearer thinking and a more lively appreciation of just why he has failed to express himself satisfactorily in his imperfect sentences!

Even when by practice the greatest facility is obtained, it requires at least ten minutes, perhaps fifteen, to correct a paper of three hundred words, and the best way to do it is orally, the pupil himself writing the corrections as he is directed. A few such criticisms, by a thoroughly intelligent and competent teacher who is sufficiently sympathetic, will do wonders. In fact the present writer knows of no other way in which English composition can be taught successfully than by this careful, sympathetic, strictly personal criticism of theme work prepared under favorable conditions. Doubtless all teachers of English will agree to this.

The best results can be obtained only when the classes are small. When the classes are what they now average in high schools and even in colleges, the teacher must choose between giving a very few careful personal criticisms and letting the rest go entirely, or trying to give a very cursory written criticism to as large a number as possible. The present writer believes the cursory method absolutely fatal to good results—a painful, conscientious, but none the less futile, expenditure of time and energy.

Written criticisms are probably better than oral if the pupil

can be forced to give attention to what is written; but as this seems impossible or very doubtful, there can be little question that the only good and rational way is to correct papers orally, forcing the pupil to write his own corrections under dictation. *If every such criticism is in the presence of the whole class, if every member of the class has a paper on the same identical subject-matter*, so that five to six successive criticisms made during the recitation hour lead each pupil in the class to review his own work five or six different times while he listens to individual criticisms and of course takes his own turn once a week or once in ten days, and *if all pupils are forced to study their own work repeatedly* by the application of a "system for self-criticism," and finally rewrite nearly every paper from memory after this most thorough study so as to get freedom of style and ease of expression, then teachers will get good results in proportion to the number of pupils they handle, and without doing much, if any, thankless drudgery outside of the class.

All pupils are making much the same mistakes. How foolishly unscientific it is not to keep the entire class to listen to all of the criticism, even the most individual! While a pupil would benefit more by the criticism upon his own work, no teacher can doubt that he will benefit very materially by following closely the criticism of others, especially if *the material is identical*.

HABIT-FORMING IMITATION OF MODELS VS. CREATIVE WRITING

Results in writing and speaking good English come only from establishing habits—and that requires *persistent work along very fixed lines*, just as piano teachers keep their pupils most of the time on finger exercises. It is a little monotonous, but *habits* can be formed in no other way.

English composition is intended to teach pupils to express whatever thoughts in the ordinary rounds of life they have actual occasion to express—not to make novelists, essayists, or poets of them. There should be *intense concentration on expression*. Why not take the thoughts expressed by the great literary masters (who wrote in classic English) and drill pupils persistently on the expression of those thoughts in modern conversational English? Then they not only have thoughts supplied, but they have always before

them the best models of expression. Most teachers of composition theoretically approve the method of Franklin and Stevenson of imitating masterpieces; but as they are not provided with a severe and practical system, they flit from one literary flower to another, and fail, because of lack of sufficient intensity, to create habits.

ORAL PRACTICE

The ideal style for letter writing (and that is where the average pupil needs to use his power of English composition after he has left school) is good conversation. If a person can talk well, and then can express himself in a letter as well as he can talk, he has attained the ideal. Our schools teach written literary composition which is unsuited to conversational uses. Most teachers admit the value of oral teaching of English, but do not seem to know how they can handle the subject. The most simple system for doing this is to retell orally in the class the substance of a simple literary masterpiece. Few pupils will retell that substance in antiquated literary English. The natural instinct will compel a conversational selection of words. Obviously, oral telling of the story or oral description is the correct preparation for natural written expression.

SYSTEMATIC REWRITING

Nearly all of the rewriting required at present in high schools is along the line of correcting errors and presenting a mechanically accurate paper. The present writer has found that the best composition, after thought and study, can be laid aside and rewritten from memory with a vastly improved style. The first writing is necessarily a part of the process of thinking out the subject, while the second writing leaves the attention free to concentrate on the best expression.

THE HABIT OF SYSTEMATIC SELF-CRITICISM

Pupils need to be taught how to criticize—how to criticize their own work systematically, and then how to criticize the work of others. When the teacher tries to do all the criticizing, this power of criticism is not developed. Many teachers at times ask pupils to exchange papers and criticize the work of each other; seldom

do they call upon them to criticize their own work under direction. Small results are to be obtained without telling the pupils just what to look for, what they will probably find, and what criticism they ought to make.

Only one subject can be considered by the beginner at one time. First the young critic must go over the paper to read aloud and try to catch dissonant words or unmelodious phrases; then he should go over the whole especially to find errors of grammar; then errors of punctuation, etc. When things are taken up one at a time, when the probable errors are suggested, and the teacher leads the mind of the pupil along by easy steps, a real power of criticism will soon develop, and it will be of infinite value. When only five or six papers can be criticized during a recitation hour, all the others ought to be subjected to the best critical revision of the pupils, who will be going over their papers to look for just the things the teacher is trying to find in the one paper that is receiving personal attention as it is read aloud.

EXCHANGE CRITICISM

The first effort should usually be criticized by the pupil himself as he follows the teacher's audible and public criticism of the papers that are read aloud in the class. Each paper so read aloud should usually be made a subject of study on only one of the topics in the "system for self-criticism" given below; but if the teacher stands behind the pupil looking over his shoulder, he can indicate to the class every misspelled word, every error of punctuation, etc.

If it is possible to do so, pupils should be required to write their papers first on loose sheets of paper, and when they are perfected to copy them into a special composition book. That will give two copies: the book can be left at the desk of the teacher as pupils come in and the rough copy kept in the hands of the pupil to read from.

In the front of each book there should be one page with numbered lines, the numbers written down the center of the page. At the right of the column of numbers the names of the members of the class should be written in the order dictated by the teacher, so that each pupil has a number. When papers are to be given out for exchange criticism, No. 1 can give his book to No. 2, No. 2 to

No. 3, and so on, and a check mark made in the book to the left of the name of the person receiving the book. The next time No. 1 will give his book to No. 3, No. 2 to No. 4, and so on; and in due course every pupil's papers will be criticized by every other pupil in the class. This exchange will apply to the finally rewritten themes only. Teachers at any time by looking over the books can see how pupils are doing and give special assistance to those who particularly need it.

A SYSTEM FOR SELF-CRITICISM

After completing each composition the student should submit it regularly to the following tests:

A. Read it aloud in a natural tone of voice, if possible to some member of the family at home or to some friend, concentrating all attention upon detecting any disagreeable repetition of the same word or of similar sounds, any uneuphonious phrase, any sentence too long, any jerkiness because of sentences too short, any failure to be quite clear, and any unnatural use of a word or phrase.

B. Observe the paragraphing. Is it distinctly marked? Does each paragraph deal with but a single subject, or are two or more subjects run into one paragraph? Is any subject broken off in its middle at the end of one paragraph and taken up again in the next? Is there an easy transition from one paragraph to the next?

C. Carefully check up the things that ought to be said so as to be sure nothing of importance has been omitted. For this purpose make an outline without looking at your composition, and then compare your composition with the outline. Observe that the composition is to be written before any outline has been made. Trust first to your instinct; then check up your instinct by your reason. The present writer does not believe it is usually a good thing to make an outline preparatory to writing.

D. Rapidly run over the grammatical connection of each word to be sure every subject has its correct predicate, every verb is the right form, every subordinate clause has its introductory word, every adjective is made to modify only a noun, and every adverb is made to modify only verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs; that every phrase is in the best possible position so that no improvement could be made by transposition.

E. Examine the punctuation—first the periods, then the interrogation points and exclamation points, then the semicolons and colons, and finally the commas. Rapidly decide in your own mind what rule applies to each comma used.

F. Examine the use of words. While you write as you feel, and use the words or phrases that seem natural, you should critically test each word to

make sure (1) that it really expresses the meaning you intend; (2) that it is a good word; (3) that you cannot find a better word. Do not change any word or phrase simply because you cannot explain its use if your instinct tells you it is natural. Trust your instinct every time in preference to your reason if there is any doubt. Changing a good word or phrase unnecessarily should be considered a genuine error.

This will require going over your composition six separate times, for you should think of only one thing at a time. At the bottom of the sheet when you have finished write opposite the letter corresponding to what you are doing, as A B C, etc., the number of changes you have found it necessary to make under that head, so that in the classroom you can explain the changes, telling why you made them. That you may find them readily, circle each so that your eye will catch it quickly.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Questions following the selections for study should be given merely to help observation, and no stress whatever should be laid upon remembering the answers. Let pupils write out answers to the questions with the book open before them and read the replies they have written. There should be few recitations with the book closed. Always keep the book open, while either studying or reciting, as in real life, if it will give any help. Only the things that are done by making use of all material within reach, are of genuine importance.

CREATIVE COMPOSITION

It seems extremely doubtful whether injury is not done the student by requiring a forced creative effort. Creative writing should be not only voluntary but not even permitted unless the student actually has something he or she wants to tell. At intervals the teacher may inquire if any pupil has a story, description, or argument which he desires to write out. Those who have should be asked to tell the substance to the class, and the teacher may inquire whether the class would like to hear this paper. If the subject is sufficiently interesting to promise real entertainment or instruction, and the others manifest any desire to hear it, the teacher may give permission to write out the composition, as a sort of reward of merit. When writing compositions is actually forbidden there may be some chance that it will be desired, and as in real life, merit alone will secure a hearing.